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Negotiating With the Russians

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We Need Star Wars

In a few days the U.S. and Soviet negotiating teams on arms control will reassemble in Geneva for their last session before the Reagan-Gorbachev summit in November. It is predictable that anxiety among the democracies to show progress will mount as the date approaches. And it is certain that the Soviet Union will seek to exploit this mood to give impetus to its campaign to wreck the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI)—the Reagan administration plan to provide a defense against ballistic missiles.

How the administration handles its own initiative as it moves toward the summit involves one of the seminal decisions of the decade.

The crucial first step in that decision is the elaboration of a policy on defense and arms control that reflects the revolutionary changes in weapons technology, reduces the reliance on nuclear weapons and responds to the global yearning to banish nuclear apocalypse.

The policy on which Western defense has been built throughout the postwar period—the equating of security with the threat of massive nuclear devastation—is clearly losing relevance. The specter of apocalyptic casualties deprives the threat of action of credibility. In those circumstances, democratic publics will sooner or later retreat to pacifism and unilateral disarmament.

Yet the Soviet strategy to stigmatize efforts to devise less nihilistic alternatives has already made considerable progress. It must be firmly turned back. That can be accomplished in two ways: First, by making the West understand that if the Soviet firestorm of protest against the Strategic Defense Initiative succeeds it will doom both serious defense policy and serious arms control. And second, by negotiations that do not abdicate American goals in favor of what the Soviets have declared acceptable.

Strategic defense is the only new idea that points away from the excessive reliance on nuclear weapons which threatens strategy with paralysis and arms control with triviality. With present arsenals, no agreement that limits offensive weapons but bars defensive ones can be better than a palliative, for the following reasons:

- All efforts to induce the Soviets to reduce or limit multiple warheads while defenses were dormant have proved in vain. As a result, the number of nuclear warheads accumulated in the arsenals of the superpowers is so large, the reliability and accuracy so great and the number needed for massive destruction so small that no foreseeable reduction (even 50 percent) can in the absence of defenses affect either the capability of prevalent nuclear strategy or the psychological equation resulting from it.

- Multiple warheads create a vast disproportion between the number of launchers and the total offensive threat. Since each individual missile launcher can carry 15 or more warheads, a first strike will always offer a tempting advantage. Reducing the number of launchers while multiple warheads exist does not reduce this risk; paradoxically, at some levels of reduction it may make it worse because the ratio of warheads to launchers will remain constant.

- By the end of the century several Third World countries will have acquired nuclear weapons. Some will thereby acquire a vast capacity for blackmail because they could make the threat of suicide more plausible than the superpowers.

The Soviets clearly have an interest in perpetuating the nuclear status quo because even if nuclear weapons should turn out to be no more useful to them than to the

democracies, they have large conventional forces and a population largely ignorant of the consequences of nuclear war. But historians of the future may reflect with amazement why in an age of cataclysmic destructiveness and nuclear proliferation so many in the West considered the key to security to reside in the perpetuation of total vulnerability.

The administration has responded to the situation by elaborating a distinction between research on one side and testing and deployment on the other. Even its most tough-sounding statements are limited to continuing research. Deployment decisions, it avers, will be made after research is completed, probably by another president. In any event, the administration argues, deployment will not take place without consultation with allies and negotiation with the Soviets. In Geneva, it has refused to discuss limitations on deployment of defensive weapons, arguing that such a limitation is premature.

As a result the administration seems in the process of being driven by Soviet propaganda, allied hesitations and its own ambivalence toward what has been called a basic bargain. This "compromise" calls for reducing launchers by some 25 percent, pursuing missile defense research without testing or deployment and reaffirming the ABM treaty.

Such a compromise would elicit an almost audible sigh of relief in the West. The eventual Soviet agreement to continued research on defense would be hailed—indeed already is hailed in anticipation—as a huge Soviet concession.

However, there is no salvation in a self-delusion that identifies progress on arms control with perpetuating unsustainable dilemmas. Soviet permission is not now required to conduct research. The ABM treaty specifically allows for it, and the Soviets have taken full advantage of this provision. In any event, proscription of research would be unverifiable. Nor does the ABM treaty ban testing of earthbound technology; what it does proscribe—at least

by implication—is testing in space, where the U.S. advantage lies.

As for the proposed weapons reductions, they would have only marginal, if any, significance. They would not reduce—indeed they would tend to enshrine—the Soviet capacity for civilian devastation or even a first disarming strike.

The projected compromise would no doubt be sold with the argument that permitting research preserves all options for the future. In fact, far from co-opting the critics, it will give them another means to destroy SDI. In the aftermath of an agreed limitation of offensive weapons—however strategically meaningless—congressional opponents will mobilize in the name of arms control to thwart a major research program—especially into space-based weapons. Even if this effort should fail, making strategic defense conditional on some future negotiation will destroy SDI. Having frozen an advantageous relationship, the Soviets will not agree in a few years to what they reject now. To deploy defenses, a future president would have to jeopardize an agreement that, by then, would appear sacrosanct to the allies, and do so over the objections of many American intellectual leaders and in the face of a vicious campaign by the Soviets.

In fairness, the administration is being driven to these expedients as a tactic to rescue SDI from its implacable opponents. But on issues of principle, the democratic process requires a clear articulation and resolution of the deeper issues involved.

Ironically the projected outcome would not only perpetuate a nihilistic nuclear strategy, it would leave the democracies highly vulnerable to a Soviet breakthrough in strategic defense. The Soviets are assaulting only space-based defenses, on which they lag technologically, all the while conducting major research and testing on traditional, earth-based defenses. And they have ignored specific prohibitions of the ABM treaty when it served their strategic purposes; the new radar at Krasnoyarsk is a clear violation. Thus the proposed basic bargain combines the disadvantage of every course: it will slow down American research and channel it into the least promising technology. It will nurture euphoria without ending the prospect that some Soviet breakthrough will suddenly be deployed, perhaps even in space. It will not significantly ease the offensive threat.

The administration has an opportunity to bring about a historic change in strategic relationships and vastly reduce the threat of a nuclear apocalypse. To safeguard its opportunity the administration must abandon its distinction between research and deployment. It should state explicitly that it will not accept a ban on missile defenses but that it will negotiate the scope and nature of strategic defense simultaneously and in relation to agreed levels of offensive forces. The United States should put forward a policy that links a dramatic reduction of offensive capabilities to a limited buildup of defensive forces. Specifically:

(a) Both sides would agree to eliminate multiple-warhead missiles over an agreed period, say 10 years. (Or at a minimum confine them to a small number of, say, 100 or less.)

(b) The number of launchers on both sides would be reduced to less than 1,000, including long-range bombers. These two provisions would bring about a reduction in nuclear warheads of close to 90 percent.

(c) Both sides would agree that strategic defense could be phased in over the same 10-year period but confined to the following objectives: (1) protection of the retaliatory force (i.e., ICBM and bomber bases); (2) a defense of population against limited attacks and accidental launches by a superpower as well as attacks by third nuclear countries. Each side would be free to choose the mode of deployment—whether on land, in space or both—provided it stayed within these limits.

(d) The ABM treaty would be modified as provided in its review procedures.

Such an agreement would dramatically reverse the accumulation of nuclear warheads. The level of defense would be geared to—and therefore limited by—a sharply declining level of offense. It would reduce the possibilities of nuclear blackmail. If only an all-out attack can penetrate defenses and if a strategic defense makes it uncertain what weapons will get through, rational incentives for nuclear war will diminish.

Obviously if the Soviets persisted in refusing, the United States would have no choice except to build a strategic defense unilaterally based on the two criteria outlined above.

Such an approach would require a revolutionary change of the prevailing defense policy. Over the 10-year period under discussion, conventional forces would have to be given dominant emphasis—a decision which in any event will be imposed on us by technology. Statesmanship consists in large part of foreseeing and managing the inevitable. Failure to do so guarantees strategic and diplomatic paralysis.

It will be argued that the Soviets will never accept this policy. But over the years the Soviets have reversed many positions previously declared as immutable. The democracies cannot guarantee responsible Soviet conduct. They do have an obligation to chart a responsible course of their own that sacrifices propaganda to the opportunity for a genuine reduction in the nuclear threat.

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